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The Industrial Folk Song in Cape Breton

David FRANK

The study of folk song in Cape Breton is often associated with rural, preindustrial traditions, and the importance of the folk tradition in Cape Breton music has received considerable attention. Given the strength of local traditions, it is not surprising to find that as Cape Bretoners made the transition to an industrial society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, traditions of song writing and performance remained part of the local culture. As early as the 1920s local collectors were making efforts to preserve examples of contemporary oral tradition and efforts to document the folk tradition as it developed within the industrial community have continued to attract a limited amount of attention. Little of this material has been familiar to students of popular culture in Canada. The following discussion offers an introduction to some of the available evidence. It is clear that the folk tradition in industrial Cape Breton remains a promising field for exploration.¹

Recent approaches to the study of social history have underlined the conclusion that major economic changes in human history must also be seen, simultaneously, as cultural changes. Accordingly, social historians have begun to devote attention to the ways in which existing cultural traditions assisted in the formation of local responses to new conditions. In the case of Cape Breton the encounter between

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1. For references to the existing work, see Edith Fowke and Carole Henderson Carpenter, compilers, *A Bibliography of Canadian Folklore in English* (Toronto, 1981) and Ronald Labelle, *réd.*, *Inventaire des sources en folklore acadien* (Moncton, 1984). The evidence gathered in this study is drawn mainly from pamphlet and newspaper sources, as well as the available published collections. It should be noted that, with the exception of "The Yahie Miners", "The Honest Workingman", "A Miner's Cry", and "Arise Ye Nova Scotia Slaves", the verses cited here are provided by way of illustration and do not represent complete versions of these songs.

traditions of culture and conditions of life has been a subject of some interest to social historians of the industrial community, who have come to see local culture as one of the ingredients in the development of a local sense of identity based on a common working-class experience.² In the coal and steel towns of the emerging industrial community in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, older expressions of the folk tradition survived, often incorporating new themes. At the same time common experiences in the industrial environment promoted the creation of a vigorous local tradition of industrial folk song. The evidence reminds us that the folk tradition must not be regarded as a repository of cultural artefacts, but as an evolving expression of popular culture. In analysing culture as a form of social practice rather than a collection of products, we must pay attention to the changing technologies of expression and social relationships through which the tradition was produced and distributed. Applying the cultural analysis of Raymond Williams further, we can see how older, "residual" traditions not only adapted to new conditions but also contributed to the creation of new, or "emergent" cultural traditions in the industrial community.³

The category of industrial folk song has received careful definition by A.L. Lloyd. In general, "folk songs are vernacular poetical and musical statements made by working people about their specific problems"; "By 'industrial folksong' let us understand the kind of vernacular songs made by workers themselves directly out of their own experiences, expressing their own interests and aspirations, and incidentally passed on among themselves mainly by oral means". In addition to "the anonymous, orally-spread, firmly traditional kind of song made by 'insiders'", Lloyd also recognizes the role of individual creativity and print circulation in the development of the tradition. Yet he goes on to repeat that folk songs must be "self-made" by origin and that songs created from outside, "on behalf of the working class", whether labour anthems or music hall entertainments, must be excluded from the definition. In this approach an appreciation of the identity between performer and audience is central to understanding the vitality of the tradition. As Lloyd points out, folk songs are

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2. See Don Macgillivray, "Glace Bay: Images and Impressions", in *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures* (Sydney, 1983), pp. 170-91, and David Frank, "Tradition and Culture in the Cape Breton Mining Community in the Early Twentieth Century", in Ken Donovan, ed., *Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island's Bicentennial. 1785-1985* (Sydney, 1985), pp. 203-18.
 3. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 52-3, 121-7.

“created and sung by men who are identical with their audience in standing, in occupation, in attitude of life, and in daily experience”.⁴

To begin, let us consider some of the evidence contained in the large body of work collected from the Gaelic folk tradition in Cape Breton. The crisis of rural society in the late 19th century was accompanied by large movements of population into urbanizing and industrializing districts both near and far. The theme is apparent in a number of the Gaelic songs collected by Charles W. Dunn. From Boston one emigrant Cape Bretoner lamented: “Here I am, an insignificant creature, in Bean Town with no home of my own except a tiny room in a garret”. On a visit home in 1918 another bard grieved the changes which had taken place since his departure: “It’s a sad trial for me to come back to the ruins of the place where I was reared as a boy; tangled burdock is growing over it and tall nettles, and I can’t get near the place”. Similarly, a Margaree bard who had not joined the exodus lamented the depopulation of his home district in these terms: “Great is the loss of Egypt, the fine men that are leaving it: MacLean, MacLellan, and MacAdam who have deserted the place”, and a chorus continued: “Oh I’m the worse; Oh I’m the worse as things have turned; I’m the worse since you have moved away to stay in the country of coal”.⁵

Migration to the coal towns exposed Cape Bretoners to the hardships and uncertainties of working-class life, and the Gaelic tradition soon incorporated references to the industrial world. One Gaelic song from Glace Bay, *Oran na Bochdainn* (Song of the Depression) described the distress of the Unemployed miner in the 1930s:

We did not work very much all summer, we will not be able to live when
winter comes; we will not get
honey as the hornet does when it builds a nest
in a clump of hazel.

Bheir mi o, agus o ro eile,
Bheir mi o, agus o ro eile,
Bheir mi o, agus o ro eile,
Begging is a poor livelihood.

4. A.L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (New York, 1970), pp. 317-8, 340-1, 367-8.

5. Charles W. Dunn, *Highland Settler: A Portrait of the Scottish Gael in Nova Scotia* (Toronto, 1974[1953]), pp. 128-31.

If I had the means of doing it, I would be diligent,
and I would go home from the mines to my friends
since they were faithful, and I would never depart again,
although I would receive a legacy.⁶

The Scottish tradition occupied a prominent place in the cultural life of the coal towns, but it is clear that this tradition adapted both in language and in content to the new environment. One of the most durable songs in Cape Breton, *Mo Run Geal Dileas* (My Faithful Fair), was a love song whose original Gaelic lyrics were complemented by English verses:

As I crossed over to the Big Harbour
A-purpose for to see the spray,
I spied a maiden from Boularderie over,
I surely thought she was Queen of May.

As the song continued to circulate in both Gaelic and English, the strong lilting melody also attracted references to the life of the coal towns:

I went down to the Sydney coal mines,
A-loading coal out at number three,
Oh! I was boarding at Donald Norman's,
He had the daughters could make good tea.⁷

The same song has also been collected under other titles, including "I went to Norman's":

I went to Norman's for a pair of brogans,
A bar of soap and a pound of tea.
But Norman said that he could not give them
Till fish got plenty on Scatterree.⁸

Others have recalled the song as "When I First Went to Caledonia":

When I first went to Caledonia
I got loading at number three
And I got boarding at Donald Normans
He had a daughter could make good tea.

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6. Helen Creighton and Calum MacLeod, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia* (Ottawa, 1964), pp. 236-7. This song was written by J.H. Jamieson of Glace Bay and published in a Gaelic newspaper column in 1932, but subsequently collected from a Gaelic singer in Briton Cove.
 7. *Songs of the 185th Overseas Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, Cape Breton Highlanders* (n.p., n.d.) pp. 13-14.
 8. John C. O'Donnell, *The Men of the Deepes* (Waterloo, 1975), p. 49. See also Helen Creighton, *Maritime Folk Songs* (Toronto, 1961) where the melody and related verses are presented as "Peggy Gordon".

Amby Thomas' explanation of the origins of the song confirm its status in the continuing folk tradition: "I just heard it you know. People singing it at home. . . . You'd hear everybody singing it around home and at parties. There's a lot of it mixed up with another song. They put them words in it about Cape Breton. I have no idea who wrote it. It seems this fellow he left the country and went down to Glace Bay, Caledonia mines it was that he got work in".⁹

Much of the collecting to date in Cape Breton has focused on elements drawn from the Scottish tradition. It needs to be more fully recognized that although Scottish origins offered the most widely-shared ethnic identity in the coal towns, most of the residents of the mining settlements came from other backgrounds. These Cape Bretoners brought a variety of songs and ballads from other ethnic contexts in rural Cape Breton, the Maritimes and Newfoundland, as well as from more distant homelands. For instance, a variation of the English coalfield ballad, "Six Jolly Wee Miners", found a new home in Glace Bay as "Jolly Wee Miner Men", which George Korson collected from a Glace Bay miner in 1940:

We're all jolly wee miner men,
 And miner men are we,
 We have travelled thro' Canada,
 For many's the long dee.
 We have travelled east and travelled west,
 This country round and round,
 For to find out the treasures
 That lie below the ground.¹⁰

And immigrant Scottish miners soon substituted Glace Bay for Glasgow, in "I belong to Glace Bay, dear old Glace Bay town. . ."¹¹

A rich vein of humour and satire runs through the folk tradition in Cape Breton. These songs drew upon well-known events and personalities for their appeal, and remained as popular in the industrial community as they had been in the countryside. The lively side of urban life in the boom years of the coal towns was related in the verses

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9. Ron MacEachern, ed., *Songs and Stories from Deep Cove Cape Breton As Remembered by Amby Thomas* (Sydney, 1979), p. 21.
 10. George Korson, *Coal Dust on the Fiddle: Songs and Stories of the Bituminous Industry* (Hatboro, Pa., 1965), p. 103. See also A.L. Lloyd, *Come All Ye Bold Coal Miners* (London, 1952), pp. 47, 127, 133-4. The song has enjoyed renewed popularity in recent years as one of the themes performed by the coal miners' chorus, The Men of the Deeps.
 11. Alphonse MacDonald, comp., *Cape Breton Songster: A Book of Favourite English and Gaelic Songs* (Sydney, 1935), p. 40.

of "Percy Morris", which described a Saturday night on the town in Glace Bay. The account was filled with local references to local personalities and places, *circa* 1940, which made this a durable satirical song:

When I had my night cap, I toddled for home,
Of course feeling merry, I toddled alone,
I spied a policeman which I thought was the Chief
It was Percy, and I said "Hello Skin and Grief".

A short while after he walked up to me
Saying I'll have you arrested for insulting me
You Spud Island Gannet, you narrow gauged tool
If that would insult you you're only a fool.

Oh at Senator's Corner, the crowd gathered round,
An army of cops put me to the ground,
I thought I'd be lonesome till I arrived on the scene.
Angus has eighteen boarders and I made nineteen.¹²

Other humorous songs emerged directly from the work experience. Stan Deveaux learned "I Work in the Pit" from his father, who worked in the fireroom at No. 10 colliery in Reserve Mines. As he explained to collector Ronnie MacEachern, "The song has been around as long as I can remember. I sing it because of the sincerity and humour that's in it":

I work in the pit it's a terrible hole
Getting paid by the company for hauling their coal
By dodging this trip, it's queer I'm alive.
For each day I work I get three sixty five.

The first I will mention is Old Harry Hines
He manages one of our company mines
He's very sarcastic and saucy you know,
But if you want work, to him you must go.

Oliver Penny, he runs the rake
He's half Newfoundlander the same as Bill Drake
When the wires get tangled he puts on a grin
Then him and John Angus, they play the violin.¹³

As was common in mining communities, tragedies at the mines were commemorated in song. These compositions seem to have taken a less vernacular or even a formal tone. Occasionally they were published as leaflets or broadsides in order to raise funds for the miners' families. In 1911 D.N. Brodie, a local printer associated with the early

12. MacDonald, *Cape Breton Songster*, pp. 33-4. See also MacEachern, *Songs and Stories from Deep Cove*, pp. 17-18.

13. Ronald MacEachern, ed., *Songs of Cape Breton* (Glace Bay, 1977), p. 4.

movements for social reform, published a lament for the victims of an explosion in Sydney Mines:

'Twas on the third day of January, the beginning of the year
Nineteen hundred and eleven, that caused many to shed a tear
For those eight unfortunate victims whose lives were swept away
In No. 3, at Sydney Mines, by an explosion that day.

It was a dismal sight to see those women in distress,
With their little children, as onward they did press,
Their moans and cries and bitter sighs were heard by all around,
And will never be forgotten by the people of this town.¹⁴

A few years later several songs lamented the 65 victims of the New Waterford explosion in 1917, the largest disaster in the experience of the Cape Breton miners. Among these was "The Miner", by Jack Ritchie of New Aberdeen and set to the tune "Green Caledonia":

New Waterford men from their homes are departing
They're going to labour down in the coal mine,
Of disaster impending, they have no foreboding,
As they kiss the dear ones they're leaving behind.
The clock has struck seven they all have descended
But e'er it strikes eight all are weeping in woe,
Women and children in mad haste are running,
There has been an explosion in the workings below.¹⁵

Two of the most popular and lasting songs in the oral tradition were anonymous compositions which originated in the coal miners' efforts to prevent the introduction of outside workers in the pits. This was a common theme in coal miners' songs in other districts, not only in the context of strikes and lockouts but also as part of the independent-minded colliers' efforts to maintain various forms of workers' control in their industry. "The Yahie Miners" appears to represent an adaptation of the well-known Northumberland and Durham song, "The Blackleg Miners", which dated from the 1844 lock-out in the north of England.¹⁶ The Cape Breton song is parallel in theme and structure but is also substantially different. According to McCawley, "Yahie" was a rendition of a Gaelic word meaning "uncouth farmer" and referred to inexperienced country people brought

14. "The Sydney Mines Explosion" [leaflet], D.N. Brodie Papers, Beaton Institute of Cape Breton Studies, Sydney, N.S.

15. "The Miner" [leaflet] (1917?), Beaton Institute. See also "New Waterford's Fatal Day", by Angus Timmons, collected in MacEachern, *Songs and Stories from Deep Cove*, p. 46.

16. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, p. 385.

to work in the coal mines.¹⁷ Donald MacGillivray has pointed out that these Gaelic-speaking workers would be “continually talking about and returning home” and “to non-Gaelic ears, home (dhachaidh) sounded like ‘Yahie’ ”.¹⁸ It is not clear whether the song refers generally to the seasonal influx of inexperienced miners during the shipping season or more specifically to the use of green hands as replacement workers during strikes. It may date from as early as the 1860s or from as late as the 1880s, but it seems clear that English miners working for the General Mining Association drew on memories of “The Blackleg Miners” to convey their resentment of the “Yahie Miners”:

Early in the month of May,
When all the ice is gone away.
The Yahies they come down to work
With their white bags and dirt shirt,
The dirty Yahie miners.

Bonnie boys, oh won't you gang!
Bonnie boys, oh won't you gang!
Bonnie boys, oh won't you gang!
To beat the Yahie miners.

They take their picks and they go down
A-digging coal on underground,
For board and lodgings can't be found
For dirty Yahie miners.

Into Mitchell's they do deal,
Nothing there but Injun meal,
Sour molasses will make them squeal,
The dirty Yahie miners.

Join the Union right away.
Don't you want till after pay,
Join the Union right away,
You dirty Yahie miners.

Mrs. McNab, she keeps a hall
Where the Yahies they do call,
You'll see them flock around the hall,
The dirty Yahie miners.

17. Gwen Davies, “The Song Fishermen: A Regional Poetry Celebration”, in Larry McCann, ed., *People and Place: Studies of Small Town Life in the Maritimes* (Fredericton, 1987), p. 144.

18. Donald MacGillivray, “The Scottish Factor in Cape Breton Labour”, unpublished paper, 1979.

Don't go near McDonald's door,
 Else the bully will have you sure,
 For he goes round from door to door
 Converting Yahie miners.

Jimmie Brinick he jumped in
 Caught MacKeigan by the chin,
 "Give me Maggie though she's thin
 For I'm no Yahie miner".

From Rocky Boston they do come,
 The damndest Yahies ever found,
 Around the office they do crowd,
 The dirty Yahie miners.

The Lorway road it is now clear,
 There are no Yahies on the beer,
 The reason why they are not here,
 They're frightened by the miners.¹⁹

The song continued to be performed long after the details of its origins had been forgotten. In George Korson's collection, the song is introduced with this comment by McCawley: "This 'come-all-ye' is sixty years old and still sung in District 26 (Nova Scotia)". In 1966 a local song contest drew inspiration from the persistent folk tradition. One of the entries, under the title "Kelly's Cove", appeared to be a remembered version of the Yahie Miners.²⁰

Like "The Yahie Miners", "The Honest Working Man" was also an anonymous song which articulated the miners' efforts to control the labour market in the coal industry. It is difficult to date this song, but it again appears to be associated with the late 19th century period of development in the industry, when coal mining was almost entirely a seasonal activity and the chief competition for local labour came from Acadians and Newfoundlanders rather than European immigrants. This was perhaps the most popular of all the industrial folk songs of Cape Breton and has been referred to as "Cape Breton's National Anthem":

Chorus:
 Way down in East Cape Breton, where they knit the socks and mittens,
 Chezzetcookers represented by the dusky black and tan,
 May they never be selected, and home rule be protected,
 And never be connected with the honest working man.

19. Stuart McCawley, *A Book of Songs and "Come-all-Ye" of Cape Breton and Newfoundland* (Glace Bay, 1929), pp. 20-1.

20. Korson, *Coal Dust on the Fiddle*, pp. 334-5; O'Donnell, *Men of the Deeps*, p. 33.

What raises high my dander,
 Next door lives a Newfoundlander,
 Whose wife you cannot stand her
 Since high living she began.
 Along with the railroad rackers,
 Also the codfish packers,
 Who steal the cheese and crackers
 From the honest working man.

The man who mixes mortar
 Gets a dollar and a quarter,
 The sugar factory worker
 He gets a dollar ten,
 While there's my next door neighbour
 Who subsists on outdoor labour
 In the winter scarcely earns enough
 To feed a sickly hen.

They cross the Bay of Fundy,
 They reach her on a Monday,
 Did you see my brother Angus?
 Now tell me if you can;
 He was once a soap box greaseman,
 But now he is a policeman,
 Because he could not earn a living
 As an honest working man.²¹

By the 1920s the song appeared to have lost much of the original meaning. "It is sung at picnics and parties", wrote Stuart McCawley in a newspaper column in 1926, "and goes best after a few shots of strong rum. The swing of the song is good and the local touches are laugh provoking. It was originally a piece of irony aimed at the importation of 'foreign' labour. Anyone not porridge-bred, and from Cape Breton, was a 'foreigner'. Today the Chezzetcookers and Newfoundlander are native, and have joined the East Cape Bretoners in singing against 'the foreigner' ".²² In a 1935 songbook the word "Chezzetcookers" (referring to Acadians from the eastern shore of Halifax County) was transcribed as "chess and cookers", and a new last verse ended the song with a friendly welcome which suggests that ethnic rivalries were being superceded by a local sense of identity as Cape Bretoners:

21. McCawley, *A Book of Songs and "Come-all-Ye"*, pp. 7-8. See also MacDonald, *Cape Breton Songster*, pp. 1011, and Edith Fowke, Comp., *The Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs* (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 80-1, 201.

22. *Halifax Chronicle*, 20 November 1926.

Way down in East Cape Breton
 Where you get a welcome fitting
 In Sydney you will meet them
 They are loyal to a man
 From the farmer to the miner
 There isn't any finer
 hey will show you how to treat them
 As no other body can.²³

One recent recording by Charlie MacKinnon carries the theme of local solidarity among the coal miners a step further, adding the following new verse:

I think I will meander
 With my friend the Newfoundlander
 He is the finest fellow
 That ever graced this land
 His name it is Dan Alec
 And he can talk the Gaelic
 We work down in the coal mine
 With the honest working men.²⁴

In times of industrial conflict new songs were produced, and the lengthy industrial conflict of 1909-1910 inspired at least ten separate compositions, many of which were printed in the pages of labour newspapers of the time. "A Miner's Cry", by "Teddy the Tiller" of New Aberdeen, provided a detailed example of the kind of grievances which provoked the strike. At the time the Provincial Workmen's Association appeared to be in collaboration with the coal companies, and miners were turning to the United Mine Workers of America. This lengthy song, with its references to personalities such as PWA Grand Secretary John Moffatt and UMW organizer Peter Patterson, was published in the *United Mine Workers' Journal* several months before the outbreak of the strike:

I am a jolly collier lad, as blithe as blithe can be,
 For let the times be good or bad, it's all the same to me;
 I always worked so stiff and hard, and nothing could I save,
 Till I began to think at last that I must be a slave.
 Then I began to study out the labor question here,
 And it didn't take me long to find that things were mighty queer,
 For if you were a boss's friend you always got a show,
 And if you wasn't a good such 'twas best for you to go.

23. MacDonald, *Cape Breton Songster*, pp. 10-11.

24. Tape 1067, Beaton Institute. Consider also the reversal of meaning in the chorus, where lines three and four read: "May they never be rejected and home rule be protected,/ And always be connected with the honest working man".

When this I did discover, I began to agitate,
 I says things are crooked here, why can't we make them straight?
 I then took up the question in the good P.W.A.,
 The committee said they'd see to it upon that very day.

They came next night of meeting and reported "things all right",
 The report it being accepted and 'twas written down so bright;
 I still worked on quite satisfied until comes ticket day,
 My rate was cut, some three shifts short, and its tail was torn away.

I went to see the manager, and began to show
 That this was not the contract that we signed a month ago,
 That instead of a reduction it should be an increase,
 He said the bosses underground had all to do with these.

When Skipper Tom came up that night, his lid was hanging low;
 I modestly saluted him and he returns "Well, Joe",
 I stated there my grievance and he squeezed his eyes so tight,
 He says, just wait until next pay and things will be all right.

Two weeks rolled on and pay day came, I expected all my lot.
 But when I gazed upon my sheet it made my temper hot,
 Instead of giving what I lost, took more of what I had,
 As this was no unusual game, it didn't drive me mad.

This thing was always going on, and fast becoming worse,
 And we had no protection from any known resource,
 But now we miners struck a blow our freedom to obtain,
 For we know well we've naught to lose except that horrid chain.

Come all ye jolly collier lads, while this to you I say,
 Come band together and unite, upon this very day,
 That we may all stand up and say a slave no more I'll be,
 Remember I was born a man and you must set me free.

Now "goo-goo" Red John, keep away, we're on to all your games,
 You turned a traitor to your class and you disgraced our names,
 And when our freedom is declared we'll march in bright array,
 And we'll sing out ten thousand cheers for U.M.W.A.

Chorus:

Oh, crooked Red John, what do you mean to do,
 You want to teach us the lesson the company taught to you.
 Mind what you are about, old man,
 For Patterson to-day will turn you out and send you to rout
 With our U.M.W.A.²⁵

25. *United Mine Workers' Journal*, 1 April 1909.

One prolific writer and performer at the time of the 1909 strike was Patrick J. Lynch, a local UMW officer at New Aberdeen. His composition "The United Miners" set forth the causes of the dispute, and his "Greetings to E.S. McCullough" was sung "with great success" at a meeting to welcome this representative from UMW headquarters in 1910.²⁶ One of Lynch's songs, "Arise Ye Nova Scotia Slaves", proved particularly durable. Set to "The Wearing of the Green", this song entered the local oral tradition and part of it was recorded by George Korson in 1940:

Through years past the coal companies have trodden down the poor,
But now comes the crisis, the miners' votes galore;
The capitalists do shudder, they now must turn aside
To the miner's class in power, and may ever we abide.

Tom Lewis, a name we cherish; a brilliant star today,
And the deeds he has accomplished with the U.M.W.A.
The coal barons they do tremble before this mighty man,
An American true and humble, and he is doing all he can.
For the union he is fitting to help the miner boys along,
And the Upper Ten are grunting and this indeed is wrong;
For to give a little portion of what they have in store,
For to keep us from starvation, and to have a little more.

And to keep the home together at the evening of the day,
For to part with home is bitter before going to the clay;
How many a home was broken in the days that have gone by,
And everything forsaken; but now we can defy.

And how often have we spoken about the miners of this land
Crushed by heavy burdens and that on every hand
They have no voice whatever; the miners were kept down
With the corporation in power; poor subjects for a crown.

Fathers, husbands, son and brothers they have driven from their home
By their unfair, unjust methods in this little Glace Bay town;
And their shame they may try to flaunt, for the poor slaves pay them well,
And by their filthy money they have sent their souls to hell.

But the day is fast coming when the miners will be free,
And the U.M.W. colors flying on the plains for all to see,
And the name of E.S. McCollough we never will forget;
A man who fights for freedom, and he fights for honor yet.

It is time for the coal miners to rise up on their feet,
And crush the opposition wherever they will meet;
Too long the capitalist party has kept the miners down,
With their mansions full and plenty, and the miners they do frown.

26. *United Mine Workers' Journal*, 17 March 1910, 5 May 1910.

An when the strike is over we'll march in grand array,
 And we'll ring ten thousand cheers for the U.M.W.A.
 And the scab will go under like the man before the gun,
 And the miners they will flourish when the dreary strike is WON.²⁷

Again, the industrial conflict of the 1920s also resulted in the production of new compositions. The confrontation between coal miners and the British Empire Steel Corporation (Besco) reached its climax in a lengthy five-month strike in 1925. The strike culminated in a violent battle between coal miners and company police at Waterford Lake on 11 June 1925. The grim events have left a bold impression on the memory of the industrial community. According to the *Sydney Post*, "The Riot" was compiled in collaboration by "Misses M. Lewis and M. Dickson, Grade 8, New Waterford school girls":

'Twas on a Thursday morning,
 And all was going well,
 Until the Besco policemen
 Marched in and raised up Hell.
 All mounted on pit horses,
 With billies at their sides.
 Into the town of Waterford
 These Besco men did ride.
 They marched toward the power plant
 Where fires were all knocked down,
 Where lights and water were shut off,
 And left a gloomy town.
 But when the miners heard of this,
 To vengeance they gave vent;
 And straight toward the power plant
 Twelve hundred men were sent.
 And ere the day had ended,
 It was a sad affair,
 For one poor fellow-worker
 Was shot while standing there.
 Some injured here, some injured there,
 A broken leg or arm.
 These poor police were carried home
 After doing so much harm.

United Mine Workers' Journal, 5 May 1910. A shorter version of the song recorded by George Korson from union leader Bob Stewart of Glace Bay appears in Korson's *Coal Dust on the Fiddle*, p. 424.

I guess 'twill be a long, long time
 Before these cops will dare
 To ride the streets of Waterford
 And look at men and sneer.²⁸

Another account of the 1925 strike was composed by Lauchie MacNeil, who prepared and performed a variety of topical songs on events of the day. His "1925 Strike Song" accurately conveys the bitter resentment against a domestic version of "industrial Kaiserism" which was an important element in the labour unrest of the 1920s. At the same time it also expresses skepticism about the labour radicalism of the day and prescribes instead an application of Christian principles to the industrial problems:

The world is full of trouble and it's very sad to see
 Capitalist and labourers are failing to agree
 Discontentments and complaints are heard on every hand
 Among our noble labourers the mainstay of the land.

Without our union labourers the war would never'd been won
 They are now content to take a bone from those they saved from ruin
 While profiteers unconcerned are hiding without shame
 Who are other Kaisers in disguise behind another name.

The war gave them the very plate they always longed to fill
 To satisfy their greed for gain while blaming Kaiser Bill
 Justice, mercy, sympathy and pity for the poor
 Is seldom now considered in the rush for wealth and power.

There are many cruel oppressions in the profiteering game While self-
 ish greed for power and wealth puts Bill to shame
 We don't condone the Kaiser's deeds he was a mean misfit
 But there are many on the sly the Kaiser's pants will fit.

The Bolshivicky doctrine with its promise of galore
 Like many a pretty apple it is rotten at the core
 Their structure built on shifting sands, their balm for human ills
 Deceive no man of common sense to accept their drastic pills.

To solve a labour problem and in order to succeed
 One and all should pray to God at first and then all should heed
 Not only heed but practise what our Savior commands
 When this is done the problem will be solved in every land.

The song was collected by Ronald MacEachern from Amby Thomas of Deep Cove, who remembered the composer in these terms: "Some-

28. *Sydney Post*, 18 June 1925. A variant entitled "The New Waterford Raid" was collected by the army of occupation which entered the industrial area shortly after the events of 11 June and appeared in the papers of the commanding officer of the Royal 22nd Regiment: see Robert Speaight, *Vanier: Soldier, Diplomat and Governor General: A Biography* (Bungay, 1970), pp. 113-4.

thing would happen, and after that he'd sit down and he'd compose a song about it. He'd take a melody from another song, whichever song would suit it. I knew them with the melodies he put on them. He'd go to the Post-Record in Sydney and he'd have them published and he'd go around selling them. He travelled pretty near all over Cape Breton selling them. He didn't have too much of the goods of this world. He had quite a large family and they lived off the land. His singing was very strong, sort of a tenor. He'd come to the house and all you'd have to do was ask him to sing".²⁹

While MacNeil seemed to view the events from something of a distance, other writers acquired reputations as bards of the industrial workers. In the months prior to the 1925 strike Dannie Boutilier produced a didactic presentation of the coal miners' case:

What will you say, Public, what will you say,
 If the miners drop their picks;
 If the work suspends when this contract ends
 Here in District Twenty-Six —
 If Besco tries to cut their pay,
 And the men put up a fight:
 What will you say, Public, what will you say,
 Will the men be wrong or right?

What do you think, Public, what do you think,
 Should the men receive a cut?
 Shouldn't they combat a thing like that
 Which will put them in the rut?
 When every minute they're at work
 Of their lives they are afraid?
 What do you think, Public, what do you think —
 Are they being overpaid?³⁰

Boutilier was a resident of Springhill, but his work was distributed across the province and originally appeared in the *Maritime Labor Herald*, published in Glace Bay. By the 1950s Boutilier was known as "The Poet of the Pits" and several collections of his work had appeared in print.

The largest body of work of this kind was that produced by Dawn Fraser of Glace Bay, whose writings echoed the themes of labour radicalism in the 1920s:

29. MacEachern, *Songs and Stories from Deep Cove*, pp. 31, 35.

30. *Maritime Labor Herald*, 3 January 1925. Another song of 1925, "When Your Income is Just 40 Cents a Week" appeared in one of Boutilier's collections, *Poems for the People* (n.p., 1954), pp. 20-1.

Listen my children, and you shall know
 Of a crime that happened long ago,
 In the dark and dismal days of old
 When the world and all was ruled by gold,
 When the earth was a rich man's institution —
 That was before the Revolution —
 When the gold was dug by the toiling masses
 But stolen from them by the master classes. . .

With Dawn Fraser, however, we enter into the area where the oral emphasis and the spontaneity of the folk tradition seem to give way to a more conscious effort to construct a local working-class culture. Although Fraser was at home with the oral tradition and read his compositions at public meetings, his work was principally distributed in published form in pamphlets, newspaper and books. These were not so much folk songs as verses in the tradition of Robert Service and other popular authors. Moreover Fraser's work was closely associated with the viewpoint of an individual author and, at least prior to the 1970s, there was little evidence that his work had entered into local traditions of performance in the industrial community. Still, Fraser's contribution complemented and extended that of the anonymous bards who wrote the classic industrial folk songs of the area. Fraser's achievement represented a maturing of the folk tradition and deserves to be seen primarily as part of an emergent working-class culture in the industrial community.³¹

At the same time as these writers were turning to print as a means of distributing their work, there was also a growing recognition of the need to collect and preserve the oral tradition passed down by previous generations. It is from this decade that we may date some of the early collections of work from the folk tradition in Nova Scotia, such as W. Roy Mackenzie's *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia* (1928) and Helen Creighton's *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia* (1932). The Glace Bay collector Stuart McCawley made the point simply enough when preparing his first collection of local materials in 1929: "When Lord Macaulay gathered 'The Lays of Ancient Rome' and made them a classic, he was saving for the world the 'Come-all-yous' of the ancient Dago. Every country has its folk songs. . . Our forefathers

31. See Dawn Fraser, *Echoes from Labor's War: Industrial Cape Breton in the 1920s* (Toronto, 1978), with an introduction by David Frank and Don Macgillivray, pp. 9-25. Since then a short autobiography has been published in *Cape Breton's Magazine*, No. 45 (June 1987), pp. 76-9. There have also been efforts to popularize his verses through public performance, most recently in the musical revue "Tougher Times", presented by the Glace Bay Food Bank in September 1987.

of the Scottish Isles brought over many folk songs mostly in the Gaelic. Their descendants carried on with *The Honest Working Man*, *Donald from Bras D'Or*, *Judique on the Floor*, and many others that are remembered but not in print".³² McCawley's collections of songs and stories appeared in newspaper columns and pamphlets during the 1920s. These publications helped to document and maintain the popularity of songs originally created within the oral tradition. As one of the Song Fishermen of the 1920s, McCawley appreciated that local traditions offered a kind of cultural reservoir and inspiration which could be drawn upon in the effort to build a cultural identity for the Maritimes. This was particularly appealing in the 1920s, for this was the decade when the region suffered severe economic reverses and expressed its most radical dissatisfaction with the political arrangements of Confederation and the economic consequences of industrial capitalism.³³

This was the decade when oral traditions across North America were being eclipsed by new technologies of communication such as recorded music, radio and movies. It must be recognized that folk music is ultimately rooted in the oral tradition, and that the 20th century technologies of communication associated with recorded music, emphasizing the establishment of mass markets, standardized tastes and the general commodification of culture, have inhibited the scope and appeal of a popular culture rooted in the folk tradition. In the 20th century such an approach helps to explain the breakdown of local cultural traditions, especially since the 1920s.

Already at the time of the strikes of 1909-10 and the 1920s, it was apparent that local songmaking was sometimes prone to parody the songs associated with the developing world of mass popular entertainment. In 1909 the PWA leaders had been satirized in "A Parody on the City of Signs and Tears", a take-off on "Mr. Gallagher and Mr. Shean". At an evening of entertainment sponsored by the Women's Labour Club of New Aberdeen in November 1924, one entertainer applied new words to the popular music of the day with a parody enti-

32. Clipping from a column in the *Pictou Advocate*, 1929, in the Stuart McCawley Scrapbook, Miners' Museum, Glace Bay, p. 162.

33. See Gwen Davies, "The Song Fisherman: A Regional Poetry Celebration", pp. 137-50. For recent surveys of the regional experience in the 1920s, see John G. Reid, *Six Decisive Decades: Times of Change in the History of the Maritimes* (Halifax, 1987), pp. 161-92, and David Frank, "Class and Region: Accommodation and Resistance in the 1920s", unpublished paper prepared for the Atlantic Canada in Confederation Workshop, November 1987.

tled "How are 'ya going to keep them down in the mine if you try to cut their pay?"³⁴ An interesting example of the adaptation of popular music to local uses in Chéticamp was provided by Anselme Chiasson, who collected a satirical song composed about 1913 about the local experience in gypsum mining. This was sung in French to the tune of "Casey Jones": "Chéticamp, oh, beautiful Chéticamp/You have always been poor/You will be rich sometime".³⁵

After a generation's exposure to the forces of radio, changes in popular culture were certainly evident. In 1952 the Sydney radio station CJCB (which began broadcasting in 1926) sponsored a song contest which attracted numerous compositions. The original lyrics of these songs often gave expression to a local sense of identity in which the industrial experience was a prominent theme. The songs were mainly set to melodies popularized by radio and recordings, yet it is possible to see this work too as forming part of a local tradition in which songs continue to be made by and for the local community. Perhaps the most successful was "Plain Ol' Miner Boy", composed by a miner's wife, Mrs. Joe Campbell, to the tune of a contemporary country and western song, "Plain Ol' Country Boy":

I've been a miner all my life, I work in Caledonia
 I had nine kids from a good kind wife, but one died of pneumonia
 Now we've only got the eight, some big and some are little
 It takes most every cent I make, buy them milk and vittles.

 Sixteen feet to keep in shoes, and sixteen hands in mittens,
 Maw gives them all a dose of oil whenever she sees fitting,
 Maw makes their clothes from flour sacks, and things she can mend over
 And you can see ol' Robin Hood sometimes when they bend over.

 I'm a plain ol' miner boy, a tough hard workin' miner boy
 I have a few on Saturday night and I sleep all day on Sunday
 I lead a very simple life, but I love my kids and I love my wife
 I'll be going down that ol' mine shaft when the whistle blows on
 Monday.³⁶

This ironic rendition of the conditions of the miner's life lacks the bit-

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34. *United Mine Workers' Journal*, 14 October 1909, *Maritime Labor Herald*, 26 April, 15 November 1924.
35. Anselme Chiasson, *Chéticamp: History and Acadian Traditions* (St. John's, 1986 [1961]), pp. 82, 303. This important work contains numerous other examples of the tradition in the Acadian community.
36. These verses are from the version collected by MacEachern from Mrs. Campbell in 1977 and published in MacEachern, *Songs of Cape Breton*, pp. 2-3. An unpublished recording of the songs from the 1952 contest continues to circulate in the industrial community and a copy was held at the Miners' Museum, Glace Bay.

teness of its predecessors in the field but in this probably simply reflects the defensive mentality of the 1950s in the coal industry. The song has continued to enjoy popularity in the industrial community and is frequently performed.

In a more militant vein, however, we can also reflect on the significance of Charlie MacKinnon's "Let's Save Our Industry", which became the theme song for the rescue of the Sydney steel industry in 1967. This song played its part in rallying community support for public ownership of the steel industry at a time when the survival of the coal and steel industries was in question:

It brought us joy, it brought us tears
It's been here over fifty years
It built our hopes and built our fears
And made this island what it is.

Chorus:

Let's save our industry
Let's save our industry
Let's save our industry
The industry we need.

We need the help of Ottawa
We're also a part of Canada
They can subsidize Ontario
Expo and the Seaway too.³⁷

While the folk tradition, like the oral tradition, may be on the wane historically in the 20th century, it is also the case that tradition can offer inspiration to the contemporary generation of performers. The significance of the folk tradition is apparent in the work of a performer such as Ronnie MacEachern, who consciously sought out older composers and modelled his own writing on the lessons of the folk tradition. In the late 1970s MacEachern not only collected and published the work of older performers but also wrote, performed and published his own contributions to the tradition. Some of these, such as "Driver Mclvor" and the "Spruce Bud Worm Song", appeared as broadsides. Others were contributed to editions of the local musical review *The Rise and Follies of Cape Breton Island*. One of his most effective compositions was "The Names Song", which captured the dilemma of his own generation of Cape Bretoners faced with the choice of emigration from the local community. This song runs through an alphabetic catalogue of Cape Bretoners of all ethnic origins and bids them a nostalgic farewell:

37. Tape 1067, Beaton Institute.

Here's a song now for the Andersons,
 For the Abbassess and for the Arsenaults,
 For the Anthonys and the Annestys
 To the Archibalds and for the Atkinsons.

And best of luck to all the Barringtons,
 All the Bakers, Burkes and Bannermans,
 The Bagnells and the Boudreaus
 To the Bennetts, Bests and the Brocklehursts.

Chorus:

Go off on your way now
 And may you find better things
 Don't wait around 'till you have no fare to leave
 All the best if you're staying
 All the best if you should choose to leave
 Here's to kindness on your journey
 Here's to joy in your new home.³⁸

Similar influences are apparent in the work of Rita McNeil, whose songs also give expression to the experiences of a contemporary generation of Cape Bretoners, whether as emigrants reflecting on their exile, as women seeking their full place in the modern world, or as people of the late 20th century reflecting on the generation of the early 20th century. Rita McNeil's tribute to the coal miners has been one of her most popular songs and invariably stopped the show in the 1980 production of *The Rise and Follies of Cape Breton Island*:

It's a workingman I am, and I've been down underground,
 And I swear to God if I ever see the sun
 Or for any length of time
 I can hold it in my mind
 I never again will go down underground.

At the age of sixteen years,
 Oh he quarrels with his peers
 Who vowed they'd never see another one
 In the dark recess of the mines
 Where you age before you time
 And the coal dust lies heavy on your lungs.

38. As recorded on *The Rise and Follies of Cape Breton Island* [1977 edition]. Other examples can be presented from the early work of the rock group Buddy and the Boys: see Susan Perly, "Everybuddy and the Culture of Underdevelopment", *Canadian Dimension*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (July 1978), pp. 21-4. The continuities are also appreciated in R. Brunton, J. Overton and J. Sacouman, "Uneven Underdevelopment and Song: Culture and Development in the Maritimes", in Liora Salter, ed., *Communications Studies in Canada* (Toronto, 1981), pp. 10-32.

At the age of sixty four
 Ah he'll greet you at the door
 And he'll gently lead you by the arm
 To the dark recess of the mine
 Ah he'll take you back in time
 And he'll tell you of the hardships that were had.³⁹

The song was written following her first visit down a coal mine and, in this respect, might be considered as the sympathetic observation of an outsider. At the same time this is a song written out of the experience of generations of rural Cape Bretoners, especially the women who saw their men leave for the country of coal and the unfamiliar underground world of the pits. When the song is performed to local audiences at the Savoy Theatre in Glace Bay, with the support of the coal miners' chorus *The Men of the Deeps*, it is difficult to judge the performance in this context as anything but a contemporary industrial folk song.

We may conclude this survey, then, with a modest note of appreciation for the continued vitality of the folk tradition, even in the more limited scope available in the age of mass culture. Perhaps we can add too a general observation about the study of Canadian culture. Much attention has focused on the development of a national culture in Canada, one that has attempted to meet the standards of achievement established by the dominant cultural traditions of European civilization. This may be described as the national, official or high culture. But there has also persisted in Canadian society a less visible cultural tradition, based on local identities rather than the national community, a tradition which has been variously described as the unofficial, vernacular or popular tradition in Canadian culture.⁴⁰ Especially since the 1960s the search for an authentic Canadian culture has led to a rediscovery of the absences and buried traditions in Canadian culture, and the rediscovery of traditions of industrial folk song forms a part of this effort. This trend may continue to play a part in the reinvigoration of the popular tradition in local culture. The centralizing forces of mass culture remain powerful, but there is evidence today, as in times past, that songwriting remains one of the strongholds of the popular tradition.

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39. As recorded on *The Rise and Follies of Cape Breton Island* [1980 edition].

40. See David Arnason, "Comment", *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, Vol. II, No. 2 (Spring 1973), pp. 1-2, and Brian Stock, "English Canada: The Visible and Invisible Cultures", *Canadian Forum*, Vol. LIII (March 1973), pp. 29-33.